DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 383 FL 016 660

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TITLE Word Processing in English as a Second Language: A Case Study of Three Non-Native College Students.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; College Students; Computer Uses in Education; *English (Second Language); Equipment Utilization; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; Microcomputers; *Revision (Written Composition); Student Attitudes; *Word Processing; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS City University of New York

ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of using a microcomputer for writing on the composing processes and attitudes toward writing of three non-native college students. The subjects were a Korean, an Egyptian, and a Pole, former students of remedial writing in English as a second language (ESL). The data used included multiple drafts from a previous semester's writing, transcripts of interviews, word-processed multiple drafts, field notes of the students' verbal and nonverbal writing behavior, students' process journals, and videotapes of their word processing. The students received initial instruction in using the software and were then told to use the computer to complete their present ESL class assignments. The results indicate that the subjects, each of whom had characteristically done extensive revising with pen and paper, did not use computer time to revise. One used it as a tool for generating ideas, another used it for editing, and the third used it for gaining familiarity with the technology. The study further examines the reasons for each student's distinctive use of the computer. (MSE)

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WORD PROCESSING IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY OF THREE NON-NATIVE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987)

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Word Processing in English as a Second Language: A Case Study of Three Non-Native College Students

During the Fall 1986 semester, I conducted a case study on the effects of using a microcomputer to write on the composing processes and attitudes towards writing of three intermediate-level non-native college students. The subjects, Won, a Korean, Somaia, an Egyptian, and Krystyna, a Pole, were chosen from among former students in a remedial ESL writing class whose multiple, handwritten drafts were available for study, who had used peer and teacher feedback to revise extensively when using pen and paper, and who were able to articulate their learning and writing processes.

The data included hand-written multiple drafts from the previous semester, transcripts of interviews, word-processed multiple drafts, field notes of the students' verbal and non-verbal writing behavior, the students' process journals in which they wrote about their impressions of using a computer to write, and videotapes of their word processing. The subjects received initial instruction in using the software, and were then told to use the computer to fulfill assignments for their present ESL classes. They came to the computer center for three hours a week, since, like most City University of New York students, they have little time to spare between their courses, jobs and family responsibilities.

My findings, which support Collier's 1983 findings, were that the subjects, each of whom was an extensive reviser when using pen and paper, did not use their time at the computer to revise. Won used it as an instrument for generating ideas,

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Somaia for editing, and Krystyna for gaining familiarity and comfortability with the technology. In this presentation I will speak about how each subject chose to use his or her limited time at the computer, and why these choices were made. I hope to show that the subjects made intelligent choices about the best use of their time at the computer.

Won is a pragmatist; he enjoys new challenges and faces them knowing that he may fail, but proceeding as though he won't. In one of his early journal entries he wrote, "It is always fun for me to learn something which I never knew...Now I feel a little bit bored about writing on paper, so I think it is a good chance to learn about computer writing." In another, he wrote, "I want to write and play with the computer. During the writing on the computer, I will be familiar with the computer." Won is, obviously, a confident and self-reliant learner. He knows how to play and experiment with what is unfamiliar until he owns it.

At the beginnning of the semester Won worked slowly and deliberately, watching his fingers, entering a phrase of five or six words and then looking at the screen, sometimes changing the spelling of the last word, or substituting another. By the middle of the semester he had learned all the functions I taught, and others he figured out on his own, or by asking me to demonstrate. He used various ways to move the cursor and delete words; he was typing more quickly, sitting more relaxedly and sometimes scrolling to the top of the document to reread what he'd written then scrolling to the bottom to continue. As Won

gained a sense of comfort and freedom, he was able to use the computer to compose more fluently than he had when writing with pen and paper. During a mid-semester interview in which I asked him to talk about the difference in his pen and paper and computer writing he said:

> I am writing more with the computer. Sometimes when I write with the pencil, I lose ideas, so I try to read again what I am writing...When you go back you cannot read some sentences, so you don't know what words you used... So I lose ideas. So I go wrong. But when I work with a computer, everything is clear. Even if I think about a new sentence, I can keep concentrating on my ideas because everything looks clear. I mean I'm more stable around my idea, without losing it.

Won used the computer primarily as a tool for generating ideas because he appreciated the way it allowed him to put his thoughts immediately into writing. Because Korean uses a non-Roman alphabet, when writing in English with pen and paper Won had to concentrate on forming letters neatly to make them legible, thereby losing ideas. The computer freed him from the chore of handwriting and let him focus on fluently creating sentence after sentence.

The other difference in Won's writing habits when using pen and paper and a computer had to do with revision. In the final interview, Won said:

> Sometimes when I write with a pencil I write too fast. I mix up. I have to change the whole order, put the first sentence at the bottom of the page. Usually I don't do that when I work on the computer. I don't mix up ideas. Everything is in a kind of order. It's very clear. The order is very clear....When I work with the computer I just write, I'm satisfied with what I write the first time. When I write with the pencil, I need to start writing about four or five times. I have to change paper every ten minutes, make new sentences.

> But when I work with the computer, when I feel like stopping, I stop working.

Won's description of the difference in his writing process with a computer and with pen and paper seems to indicate that he stopped revising altogether; he did not. It is not true, as his account, might lead you to conclude, that his first drafts on the computer were also his last drafts. That is, after generating a first draft, and getting feedback from me or his writing teacher, he would revise by entering a second draft from memory, rarely consulting the first draft. This is different from his revising process of hand-written first drafts on which he wrote, crossing out sentences, adding words and numbering and cutting and pasting paragraphs. In fact, sometimes Won combined both processes by taking home word-processed hard copy, and revising it using the technique of numbering paragraphs and cutting and pasting them.

Although I had shown Won repeatedly how to make block moves, he never did. When I asked why, he said that since he only had three hours a week at the computer, he preferred to cut and paste at home. He had determined that his best use of his computer time was to generate ideas, while writing a first or later draft, without consulting notes or previous drafts. It may be that he simply needs more time at the computer to not only generate sentence after to sentence but also to move them around. Whatever the future developments might be, however, Won was extremely satisfied with his experience with the computer, and will continue to use them when they are available.

Where Won gained fluency with the computer, Somaia was concerned about losing the fluency she had gained in pen and paper writing. During the initial interview, she explained her reservations about using the computer:

> Within the last few months because I feel like I'm getting better as far as writing and not stopping every second. Like in class when the professor asked us to write something, I start writing and I get more fluent in writing. So maybe that also made me not think about using the computer where I have to type so I'll be slower and this might stop me from this fluency I'm having now in writing.

Before taking ESL writing classes, Somaia had had confidence in her ideas but was frustrated by her inability to express their complexity while writing in English. The fluency techniques she practiced in class allowed her to put her ideas down on paper without stopping to find the appropriate words. She learned to delay deliberating over word choices, and thus, gained fluency:

> I always thought I could write. I have the ability to express myself, but I use naive words to express myself and I was worrying about that before. Now I'm not worrying. I'll keep writing and if some good words start to my head, I'll use them.

Unlike Won, Somaia did not find advantages to using the computer as an instrument for generating ideas and first drafts, perhaps in part because she was not handicapped, as he was, by the problem of forming the letters of English due to her more extensive schooling in English. She decided to use the computer for editing and to stick with her new-found invention technique - writing non-stop in class - and to her old writing position - lying on her bed at home in the "beach position," as she put it, to write first drafts.

Somaia's style of working was to enter the handwritten drafts she had done at home, into the computer and to then correct spelling and grammar mistakes, and substitute her intial word choices with others. She said that the clean look of the text on the screen helped her detect errors, and that the spelling mistakes she missed were picked up by the spell check. Because of her frustration at having to use what she calls "naive words" to express herself, Somaia was delighted to be able to call up a thesaurus which gave her many choices. She did realize, however, that in order to make a choice, she would need to know the shades of difference in the words presented; she often called on me to explain them to her.

Somaia also realized that the computer had other uses besides editing, but she chose to master the editing functions first. Her learning process, a legacy, perhaps, of her years of training as a ballerina in the Egyptian Ballet Company, was to focus on one step at a time, practice it until gaining mastery and then move onto the next step. During the mid-semester interview she characterized her learning to use the computer in this way:

> I guess the difficulty of the computer is to have to read the manuals to know exactly what type of commands, the procedures, step by step and then after that I guess everything will be easy. It just needs a long time. When you try to work with it without having the knowledge, it's not easy.

Somaia's solution to the problem of having to work with a new machine with many capabilities was to choose a few functions to practice in order to achieve mastery.

Where Somaia used the computer to edit and Won to generate ideas, Krystyna used it to overcome her fear of the technology. When, during her initial interview, I asked how she felt about the prospect of using the computer for writing she said, "Nervous...It's too fast. You have to work fast. That kind of sounds, they make you push too fast. The sound makes me nervous to put another letter or something. It pushes you to work faster than I do... That's why I prefer not to use an electric typewriter." Krystyna's fear of the computer was part of a larger fear of operating machines. She doesn't drive or use the automatic teller machine at the bank and she dislikes using a sewing machine: "I'm always thinking if an emergency happened, would I know what to do?"

Krystyna was also concerned that she was not fast enough when writing in English with pen and paper. This lack of speed she attributed to the problem of not knowing the spelling of the words she wanted to use: "I stop because I am thinking how it's spelled, simple things, and I open the dictionary to look how it's spelled." But the issue of speed on the computer seems to have had more to do with her idea that computers were for saving time and that if she didn't go fast, she was wasting time and electricity.

Krystyna's preoccupation with both spelling and speed was dramatized about halfway through the semester, when she asked if I was going to give dictation to the students, "So you can see how fast we got and we have to have good spelling." To Krystyna,

the computer was a typewriter with a memory which allowed her to focus on spelling individual words and on increasing her speed.

Even though Krystyna remained sensitive to the hum of the computer and to the flashing cursor, perceiving both as a prod to keep writing, she did come to all of the weekly sessions and worked concentratedly. She was determined to conquer her fear of the computer. However, she was unable to master the most basic functions during the sixteen weeks of data collection. She often confused the cursor and space keys, for instance, causing her text to move and forcing her to restore it, which usually involved asking me or the other students to help her. Several times she came to the end of the screen and forgot that she only needed to continue to see more space on the screen. These confusions, though, seem to have had to do with lack of practice and confidence and will probably disappear as Krystyna spends more time at the computer and gets help when she is stuck. In fact, during the final interview, Krysytna told me that she and Somaia had signed up for a computer literacy course: "We both decided there is nothing wrong with taking computer next semester. It's really helpful. I would never have thought about taking it, if not for this project...It made me believe that I can do it better if I start to practice, and that I can do it like other people who use computers every day." Some of the mystique of these machines had been dispelled; Krystyna now feels entitled to use them.

While Somaia, Krysytna, and Won had all shown themselves to be extensive revisers when using pen and paper, none of them used the computer primarily as a tool for revision. Perhaps because there were limitations on their time at the computer, they each chose one aspect of writing to concentrate on while word processing. Krysatyna spent her time gaining comfortability and familiarity with the hard and software, Somaia with correcting mistakes and substituting original word choices with more appropriate ones, and Won with transfering his thoughts quickly to the screen.

There are two main implications to be derived from this study. One is that students need greater access to computers if they are to take advantage of all its features. The other is that in cases where computer time is limited, as it was for this study, students must be allowed to grow accustomed to the technology at their own pace, and to use it in the way they find most helpful. That is, once teachers have demonstrated the various ways of generating ideas, revising and editing, we must step back and let the students show us what they find beneficial about using this technology for writing.

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